

## HOW TO BE AN ALLY?

### **Food for thought: Becoming an ally to oppressed people.**

Excerpt from "Becoming an Ally Breaking the Cycle of Oppression"  
by Anne Bishop. Published by Fernwood Publishing, Halifax  
"How To"- Becoming an Ally

Having written that subtitle, I must now admit that I cannot tell anyone exactly how to become an ally. I can, however, use my growing analysis of the process and my experience to offer some guidelines. Most people in our society do not yet see the connections between different forms of oppression, or even have a general sense of how oppression works. Therefore, we still find ourselves dealing in most instances with one form of oppression at a time, and in a given setting, we are either in the role of oppressed or ally. I hope these observations will be as useful to you as they have been to me when I find myself in the ally role.

- 1.** It is important to be a worker in your own liberation struggle, whatever it is. Learn, reflect on, and understand the patterns and effects of oppression, take action with others, take risks, walk towards your fear to find your power.
- 2.** Try to help members of your own group understand oppression and make the links among different forms of oppression.
- 3.** Listen, listen
- 4.** Remember that everyone in the oppressor group is part of the oppression. It is ridiculous to claim you are not sexist if you are a man, or not racist if you are white, and so on. No matter how much work you have done on that area of yourself, there is more to be done. All members of this society grow up surrounded by oppressive attitudes; we are marinated in it. It runs in our veins; it is as invisible to us as the air we breathe. I do not believe anyone raised in Western society can ever claim to have finished ridding themselves completely of their oppressive attitudes. It is an ongoing task, like keeping the dishes clean. In fact, the minute I hear someone claim to be free of the attitudes and actions of a certain oppression (as in "I'm not racist") I feel they have barely begun the process. Humility is the mark of someone who has gone a piece down the road and has caught a glimpse of just how long the road is. There is a parallel here with the principles of the twelve-step addiction recovery process. Just as the twelve-step programs teach that the process of healing from addiction is never finished, so it is with the process of unlearning oppression. A white person never becomes non-racist, but is always a "recovering racist," more often referred to as "anti-racist." The other thing that makes members of an oppressor group always oppressors, no matter what kind of education process we have been through, is that, until we change the politics and economics of oppression, we are still "living off the avails". We would not be where we are, doing what we are doing, with the

skills and access we have, if we did not have the colour, gender, sexual orientation, appearance, age, class, or physical abilities we have. Resources and power continue to come to us because we are members of the dominant group in relation to the particular form of oppression where we seek to be allies. So, until we succeed in making a more humane world, yes, we are racist (or ageist, or classist, or heterosexist, and so forth).

**5.** Having accepted that every member of an oppressor group is an oppressor, try not to feel that this makes you a "bad" person. Self-esteem does not have to mean distancing yourself from the oppressor role; it can come instead from taking a proud part in the struggle to end oppression. We waste a great deal of energy in denying our responsibility for oppression. What would happen if all that energy could be put to work figuring out how to end it? **6.** Remember that in the oppressor role you cannot see the oppression as clearly as the oppressed group can. When people point out your oppressive attitudes or language to you, your first response should be to believe it.

**6.** Remember that in the oppressor role you cannot see the oppression as clearly as the oppressed group can. When people point out your oppressive attitudes or language to you, your first response should be to believe it. Then it is time to ask questions and learn more about the oppression going on in that particular situation. Try not to leap to defend yourself in one of the many ways oppressors use to deny responsibility for oppression. It is true that you will likely meet members of the oppressed group who will want to claim every little thing is oppressive and use it as a focus for their anger. You will also perhaps find members of the oppressed group who will try to use your efforts to unlearn oppression to manipulate you. It is all part of the process - their process. The point is not to defend yourself; it will not work anyway. If you can deal with your own defensive feelings, you can turn the situation into a discussion that you, and perhaps everyone else, can use to learn more about the oppression, and you will be less vulnerable to manipulation. The defensiveness, or guilt, is the hook for the manipulation. Also, if you can use your own experience of liberation to understand the anger of the oppressed, you will be able to accept it as a member of an oppressor group, not as an individual. Leave their process - working through their anger - to the oppressed group. Give your attention to your own process - becoming an ally. Then we can all participate in the process we share, ending the oppression.

**7.** Count your privileges; keep a list. Help others see them. Break the invisibility of privilege.

**8.** If you hear an oppressive comment or see an example of oppression at work, try to speak up first. Do not wait for a member of the oppressed group to point it out. Sometimes this draws a response of "Oh, I don't mind," "It was just a joke," or even anger directed at you from a member of the oppressed group. That person may be speaking out of their internalized oppression, or you may be off

base. Just accept it, if you can; admit it is not your experience. More often you will find members of the oppressed group grateful that they did not have to raise the issue for a change.

**9.** You must be patient and leave lots of room for the greater experience of members of the oppressed group, but there are also limits. If it becomes clear over time that you are being used or mistreated, say something and/or leave the situation. Here is an example: a group is interested in having you present as an ally for reasons of their safety, or your contacts, legitimacy, or resources, but is not ready to offer you any information or support. The message might be: "Just shut up and do everything we tell you and don't ask questions. It is hardly fair for the members of the oppressed group to direct all their anger, over a long period of time, at a well-meaning would-be ally. This is not reasonable treatment for anyone. It is fair for you to ask them to decide: do they want you to leave? or will they provide you with some support in your efforts to become an ally?"

**10.** Try to avoid the trap of "knowing what is good for them." Do not take leadership. They are the only ones who can figure out what is good for them, and developing their own leadership strengthens their organizations. It is fine to add thoughts or resources to the process by asking questions of the individuals with whom you have already built up some trust and equality; that is, who will not take it as coming from an authority greater than themselves just because you are a member of the oppressor group. It is not all right to take time at their meeting or public gathering to present your own agenda, or to suggest in any way that they do not understand or see the big picture.

**11.** Never take public attention or credit for an oppressed group's process of liberation. Refuse to act as a spokesperson, even when reporters gravitate to you because they are more comfortable with you or curious about you. You should speak in public only if members of the oppressed group have asked you to speak from your point of view as an ally.

**12.** Do not expect every member of the oppressed group to agree - does your group agree on everything?

**13.** Learn everything you can about the oppression - read, ask questions, listen. Your ignorance is part of the oppression. Find people in the oppressed group who like to teach and who see value in cultivating allies in general, or you in particular. Ask them your questions. Do not expect every member of the oppressed group to be ready and willing to teach you. When you are in the ally role, you have privileges and comfort in your life that members of the oppressed group do not have because of the oppression; they may not want to also give you their time and energy so that you can learn about them. They may not have the time or the energy.

**14.** Support the process of unlearning oppression with other members of your own group. Do not usurp the role of communicating the experience of the oppression; that one belongs only to members of the oppressed group. You can, however, share with other members of the oppressor group the journey of becoming an ally; you can help break through other's ignorance of the oppression. Members of your own group might hear you when they cannot hear a member of the oppressed group.

**15.** Remember that you will probably have to go out of your way to maintain your friendships and connections with members of the oppressed group. Our society is set up to separate, so that without a little extra effort, you will live in different parts of town and never cross paths. On the other hand, do not fall over backwards. It is not good to ignore the friends and support base you have already established because you are spending all your time working at the barriers, or becoming a "hanger on" of the oppressed community in an inappropriate way.

**16.** Try not to look at the oppressed for emotional support. They will likely be ambivalent about you, happy on one hand to have your support, annoyed on the other at your remaining oppressor arrogance, your privilege, the attention you get as a member of the dominant group. Their energy is needed for their own struggle. This does not mean you will not receive support from members of the oppressed group sometimes more than is warranted. For example, look at the praise men get for doing housework when women still do the vast majority of it. Try not to expect the oppressed group to be grateful to you.

**17.** Be yourself. Do not try to claim the roots and connectedness that a history of oppression can give to a community if it is not your own. Do not become what the Mi' kmaq community calls a "Wannabe." Dig into your own roots. The oppressive history of the group you belong to is a burden you carry. Search out the history of allies from your group as well. Dig even deeper than that. Every group started out as a people with roots in the earth somewhere. Find your own connection with your people's history and the earth. If it is absolutely untraceable, find appropriate ones, rebuild roots and connectedness in the present, for yourself. But do not try to steal someone else's; you cannot anyway.

**18.** Be yourself. Be honest. Express your feelings. Do not defend your internalized oppressor attitudes; say that it hurts to discover another piece of it. Do not sit on your doubts (except in public gatherings or meetings where you are an observer), ask them of someone you trust. The key word is ask. Assume that you are a learner; good learners are open.

